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International Day of UN Peacekeepers, a day of reflection

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Since the introduction of the International Day of UN Peacekeepers in 2002, every year the United Nations honours the memory of those who have lost their lives in the cause of peace. More than 3800 peacekeepers have paid the highest price while serving under the UN flag, including 98 in the year 2018. The reasons for the recent rise in fatalities among blue helmets are related to multiple factors, but can in part be explained by an existing tension between the current dominating conception of UN peacekeeping and its historic principles.

The 29th of May has been chosen because it was on this day, in 1948, that the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was sent to monitor peace in the Middle East. Indeed, this was the first UN mission in the field, but the notion of 'peacekeeping' was actually born during the Suez crisis in 1956, when lightly armed soldiers from neutral countries wearing blue helmets were dispatched as part of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to the Sinai desert to monitor the cease-fire in place between Egypt and Israel. It was an improvised diplomatic tool on which one of its architects, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, famously remarked that 'peacekeeping is not a soldier's job, but only a soldier can do it'. This statement seems to summarize perfectly the main challenge surrounding UN peacekeeping. After all, soldiers are basically trained to fight in order to protect their own country's borders or interests, but in a UN peacekeeping operation, he or she is ordered to act more as a diplomat in order to quell fighting in a country which is oftentimes far from home.

The fact that UN peacekeeping was born as an original ad hoc improvisation meant that there was no existing blueprint or model. To provide some guidelines, Hammarskjöld quickly wrote down three basic principles which would become the ethos for UN peacekeeping: 'impartiality', 'consent of the parties', and the 'non-use of force except in self-defence'. Whether to use force or not, has probably been the most central dilemma for peacekeepers.

Despite the fact that, from 1973 onwards, all mandates for UN peacekeeping operations included that the use of force was also allowed 'in defence of the mission', commanders in the field who were left to interpret this new notion to their own judgement, were very reluctant to use this possibility. In the early 1990s, when UN peacekeeping went through a process of reinvention, the question whether peacekeepers should behave as 'soldiers' or as 'diplomats' resurfaced. In Cambodia, in 1992, the Khmer Rouge faction did not respect the peace agreements they had signed and refused to cooperate. What could the UN do when their vehicles were halted at roadblocks while, on paper, peacekeepers had the right to circulate freely in all zones? Should the UN enforce its freedom of movement in defence of the mandate? This would perhaps restore the credibility of the mission, but it could also endanger the neutral position of the UN, and there was a risk that troop contributing countries would decide to withdraw their contingent if the mission became too dangerous.

The theme for this year's Peacekeeper's Day is 'protection of civilians', because over the past twenty years this concept, as the UN explains, "has been increasingly at the heart of UN peacekeeping". Indeed, the derailed peacekeeping operations in the 1990s resulted in the 'Brahimi report' (2000),

which was written with the desire to ensure that the horrors of 'Rwanda' and 'Srebrenica' would never be repeated on the UN's watch again. The report therefore emphasized the importance of protecting civilians, and strongly related to this duty, the necessity of more 'robust peacekeeping'. This meant an increased authorization and willingness to let UN peacekeepers use force. Following this philosophy, in 2005, peacekeepers also obtained the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P).

In recent years, academics have observed a 'robust turn' in UN peacekeeping, and even a rapprochement between peacekeeping and counterinsurgency operations. In other words, blue helmets are now required to act more 'soldierly' than before and, as a consequence, take more risks. There is a rising tension between this reality and the peacekeeping principles formulated by Hammarskjöld in 1956. It is striking that in its latest comprehensive report on UN peacekeeping (HIPPO 2015) the UN concluded that it remains loyal to the founding principles as "an essential guide for success", although acknowledging that "they must be interpreted flexibly in light of changed circumstances, and not be used as a shield for inaction".

In March 2018, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the Action for Peacekeeping initiative (A4P), which resulted in a declaration that was endorsed by more than 150 member states reaffirming their shared commitments for UN peacekeeping. Indeed, it's all about commitment. We need to be honest about the fact that current ambitions in UN peacekeeping may come at a high price. This is the reason why honouring the work of UN peacekeepers must be taken very seriously. At the same time, we need to pick up the challenge of developing a clear doctrine for UN peacekeeping that answers the fundamental question whether UN peacekeepers should function as instruments of diplomacy, or as instruments of protection, not to say coercion.

The current state of UN peacekeeping is the result of its historical evolution, and reminds us of the necessity to keep rethinking the concept. Let UN Peacekeeper's Day be a moment of *commemoration* for the fallen soldiers of peace, but also one of *reflection* on what we want UN peacekeeping to achieve and, more importantly, what commitments we are prepared to make in attaining these objectives.

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